informal routes used by slaves, and the “fugitive landscape.” Overall, the app does not succeed in bridging the inaccurate divide between “white” and “black” landscapes that has been perpetuated by earlier generations of scholarship.

The Slavery at Monticello app will be most useful to lay audiences, especially those on-site at the landmark. Given the dearth of high-quality interactive multimedia materials on the architecture and material culture of slavery, however, educators may also find the app to be a useful tool for introducing these topics to undergraduate audiences. On one hand, comparable living-history sites like Colonial Williamsburg have taken a measured approach after receiving severe criticism for their efforts to interpret slavery in the 1990s. On the other hand, scholarly initiatives such as the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (http://www.daacs.org) are generally dense and difficult-to-navigate platforms that provide raw data with little interpretation. The Slavery at Monticello app offers a user-friendly informational overview that can stand alone, but it is most useful when combined with scholarly materials and the resources available on the Thomas Jefferson Foundation’s other websites.

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Notes
1. This groundswell was the topic of the September 2015 conference “The New Tour: Innovations in Place-Based Storytelling,” held at the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, Brown University.

Jon Sojkowski, creator
African Vernacular Architecture Data Base
http://www.africavernaculararchitecture.com

The African Vernacular Architecture Data Base, an online project initiated and maintained by architect Jon Sojkowski, is an important and welcome new source of information about vernacular building practices in Africa. Conceived as a visual database of building types categorized by location, it includes photographs submitted by numerous contributors. Although sparsely annotated and lacking a comprehensive scientific methodology, this online project is an important contribution to the field of architectural history and will prove valuable to practicing architects and social scientists interested in the vernacular building traditions of Africa.

Sojkowski, a registered architect based in Beaufort, South Carolina, began collecting images of vernacular architecture in Africa in 1997–98 while he was serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia. During his time in that Southern African country, he found few resources to help him understand the wealth of native building traditions across the continent, which he hoped to integrate into his design courses at Copperbelt University in Kitwe. Sojkowski, who also goes by the nom de plume Jon Twingi, began assembling a visual database of Zambian vernacular architecture, using photographs he took as he traveled the country. He collected this work in the online database Zambia Vernacular Architecture (http://www.zambiaarchitecture.com), which includes visual essays on building types and construction techniques, illustrated with Sojkowski’s excellent sketches, as well as photographs and simple digital models.

In September 2014 Sojkowski expanded his research into the neighboring country of Malawi, where he visited more than three hundred villages and homesteads using funds he raised through an Indiegogo campaign. The resulting website, Malawi Vernacular Architecture (http://www.malawiarchitecture.com), is a far more sophisticated platform than his earlier project. The Malawi website includes extensive discussions of building types, materials, and building elements. It uses digital models to explain material and spatial relationships and offers short videos documenting building processes. A third national website created by Sojkowski, Swaziland Vernacular Architecture (http://swazilandarchitecture.com), includes images from four sites he visited during a week in the Southern African country.

Sojkowski launched the African Vernacular Architecture Data Base in an attempt to provide a platform for collecting information about building traditions across the continent. While the project has significant limitations, it provides an excellent point of entry for both scholars and nonspecialists interested in the broad range of vernacular building types and practices in Africa. The images and accompanying captions in the African Vernacular Architecture Data Base are crowdsourced from dozens of travelers who have submitted material to the project (Figure 1). The website does not include biographical information about the contributors, nor does it record when the photographs were taken, and so it is difficult to assess how comprehensive the database is. Some ethnic groups are well represented, while others receive scant attention (for example, to date the site includes only a single photograph of a Mousgoum house). While the photography varies in quality, many of the images are excellent. They include both overall views showing buildings in context and close-up photographs of construction details. A number of photographs record buildings under construction, providing invaluable information to both scholars and practitioners interested in traditional building processes.

Scholars may criticize the African Vernacular Architecture Data Base for several significant shortcomings, including its geographic organization and its insistence on an unchanging image of the vernacular. In terms of geography, Sojkowski organizes the website according to modern national boundaries. This is problematic in two regards: it artificially divides work by single ethnic groups (e.g., the Tuareg) according to boundaries that are effectively meaningless to their cultural traditions, and it awkwardly groups buildings (such as the Great Mosque of Djenné and the Dogon settlements of the Bandiagara Escarpment) that would benefit from more careful classification. Sojkowski also uses a fairly simple notion of vernacular architecture that fails to account for development and transformation over
time. As a result, his project is incapable of shedding light on the rise of informal settlements in urban areas. Such settlements are among the most important developments in the built environment of modern Africa, exhibiting important lessons drawn from vernacular building traditions. Sojkowski’s project would be greatly enhanced by examinations of the continent’s great urban informal settlements, such as Nairobi’s Kibera and Lagos’s Makoko, which warrant consideration within the context of vernacular architecture.

Despite its shortcomings, the African Vernacular Architecture Data Base is to be applauded for numerous insights. By including a number of building types, such as granaries, barns, coops, mosques, churches, tombs, and palaces, Sojkowski expands the discussion of vernacular architecture beyond the freestanding rural house. Similarly, the site offers information on rural compounds, improving viewers’ understanding of the farmhouse as part of a larger working complex, and towns, clarifying the material and cultural relationships among architecture, urbanism, and society.

As a website, the African Vernacular Architecture Data Base continues to grow. In fact, a newly created app for iPhone and Droid makes contributing to the database even easier. One hopes that Sojkowski will add narrative components that address questions of migration, transformation, and adaptation in contemporary African architecture. The website would also benefit from a discussion—or even a definition—of the vernacular, and from reference to the numerous excellent scholarly works that discuss African vernacular architecture, such as Paul Oliver’s edited collection *Shelter in Africa*, Labelle Prussin’s *African Nomadic Architecture: Space, Place, and Gender*, and Dora Crouch and June Johnson’s *Traditions in Architecture: Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania*.¹

The African Vernacular Architecture Data Base is an impressive project that helps bridge the interests of professional architects and scholars of the built environment. Driven by an urgency precipitated by the rapid displacement of vernacular building traditions by modern materials and changing settlement patterns, Sojkowski has used the Internet to marshal sympathetic scholars, practitioners, and amateurs to help flesh out his crowdsourced project by documenting the broad range of responses to local climatic, cultural, and material conditions. The result is an accessible website that scholars and nonspecialists alike will find useful.

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